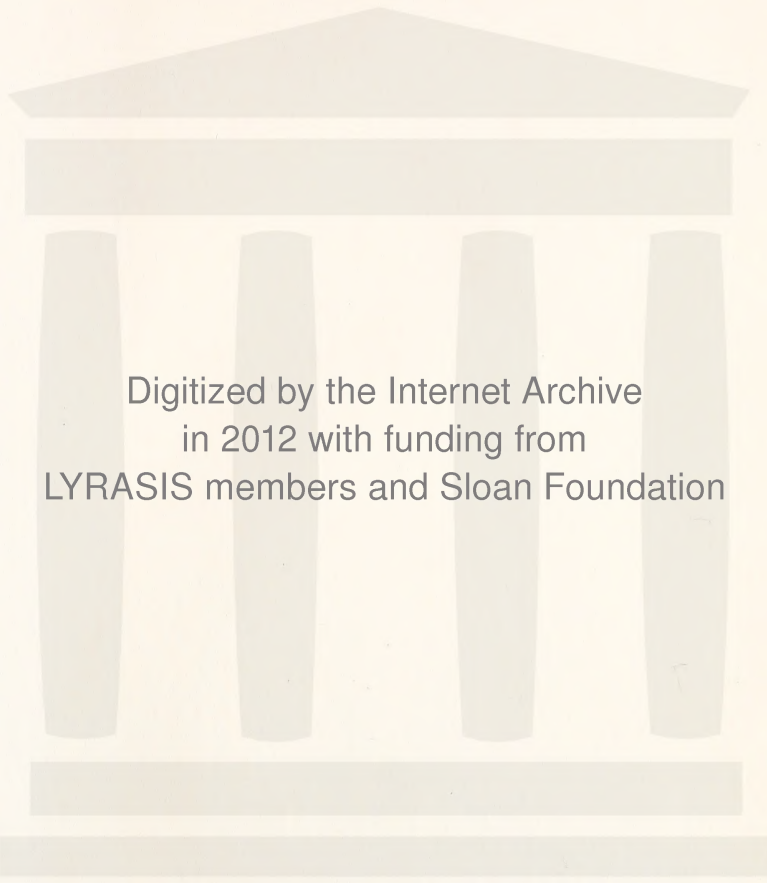


427.97

C653e

c.2



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2012 with funding from
LYRASIS members and Sloan Foundation



North Carolina State Library
Raleigh

Early English Survivals on

Hatteras Island

COLLIER COBB
///

Reprinted from
The University of North Carolina Magazine
February, 1910
The North Carolina Review, March 6, 1910

42797

C653e

c.2

B
I
N
D
E
R
Y

U
S
E

O
N
L
Y

The University Magazine

FEBRUARY, 1910

Old Series, Vol. 40

No. 3

New Series, Vol. 27

EARLY ENGLISH SURVIVALS ON HATTERAS ISLAND

Collier Cobb

Notwithstanding the uniformity of American life, which has impressed the European visitor to this land as our country's most serious drawback, there are still a few secluded spots, isolated land areas around the borders of our continent, whose inhabitants have escaped the blighting influence of predigested breakfast foods, Associated Press despatches, syndicated stories, trust-made school books, and that great destroyer, the schoolmaster.

Physiographic features here present such uniformity over vast areas that the few unique spots of land which might produce inhabitants of varying types are set apart as state or national parks, or forests, to be used as playgrounds for the people. Even the mountain section of North Carolina, which Southerners are fond of calling "The Switzerland of America," probably because it possesses not one feature of Swiss scenery, has become thoroughly modernized and Americanized, and there is not another town of its size in our country so thoroughly cosmopolitan as Asheville, our mountain metropolis, has become during the last two decades. The arts and crafts of the mountains had practically disappeared during that time, and had to be taught anew to the women of the Biltmore Estate, whose mothers and grandmothers, less than a score of years ago, were skilled weavers of exquisite tapestries.

In a land where journeys are made from the plains of the interior to Longwood or Atlantic City for a summer's out-

ing, or from Carolina to the geysers of the Yellowstone for a fortnight's holiday, and all this with as much ease and comfort as staying at home, there is little left but the monotony of American life that so deeply impressed Mr. James Bryce when he was writing his "American Commonwealth."

The sand reefs of the North Carolina coast, before the advent of motor boats in that region just a decade ago, afforded a large measure of seclusion, and that safety which comes from isolation, safety from the incursions of tourists and pleasure seekers, and from exploitation by magazine writers.

The most interesting of these reefs was then three days' journey from almost any point, but when you had made the journey you had gone back three centuries in time. Though known to everyone by name, and dreaded by all seafaring men as the graveyard of American shipping, hardly a score out of our eighty millions of population had ever set foot on this island. Even all the fingers of one hand were not needed to count the dwellers on the mainland who were personally acquainted with this dangerous sand-reef and its mild-mannered people. To most men it is a sort of world's end, as indeed it has been to many a poor mariner; and even to the few who know it best it is a veritable foreign land at home.

Hatteras Island is an elbow-shaped sand-spit, forty miles in length measured around the elbow, and from half a mile to five miles in width. It lies along the very border of the continental shelf, a hundred miles beyond the normal trend of the coast, and almost within the Gulf Stream. It occupies the center of the quadrangle made by the parallels 35° and 36° , north latitude, and the meridians 75° and 76° , west longitude.

The geological history, physiographic features, and climatic conditions of this island have been made a subject of special investigation by the writer for something like a score of years. But since geography is a study of the earth as man's physical environment, and geology a study of the earth as a field for the development of organic life, the geologist

must of necessity have an interest in the influence of environment on the human organism. The purpose of this paper is to deal with this human interest in one of its phases, the influence of isolation as it shows itself in the preservation of old English words and the ancient forms of speech once common to our group. On this island, in spite of Nature's changes, with all her storms and buffetings, we find words in daily use that have never here drifted from their mediaeval moorings.

When I reach any point on the island, my friends who have not seen me land invariably ask: "How did you come? Did you come in a boat, or did you travel?" *Travel*, in this case, means to walk. Once I was told that I could reach a certain sand dune by traveling about two acres, across a palmetto swamp, an *acre*, in this case, being a furlong, or eighth of a mile, an old English use of the word.

"How do you go home when you get to the country? Do you go by boat up the river, do you go by train, or do you travel?" I was asked by a man who knew my fondness for walking. "I do not know what I should do if we lived in the country where we could not hunt or fish, for I had rather starve than have my husband dig potatoes," one good woman said to me. By *country* they mean the mainland opposite the island, this woman explaining it to me as, "Some such place as North Carolina, or even New York, or Norfolk, or Raleigh, or Chapel Hill; anywhere off The Banks," meaning by *The Banks*, the line of sand reefs along the North Carolina coast, and using the word *country* very much as Britishers would say "the continent." On The Banks, then, a traveling salesman would be a tramp peddler.

Now this use of *travel*, as meaning to walk, to move along on foot, was common in England in the days of Queen Elizabeth, and I have found it used several times in Hakluyt's *Voyages*. It is used with a somewhat different pronunciation, but in exactly the same sense, today, in corners of Ireland, of Yorkshire, and of Scotland. I have never met with this use of the word in North America except on Hatteras Island; though among the Sioux Indians of the North and

Northwest there is in use a kind of trailer made of two lodge poles attached to a horse, like shafts, having a sack of skins lashed to the cross-bars behind the horse, and used for carrying goods, or for sick or wounded persons. The Indian name for this vehicle is *travay*, but the word used in this way is more nearly related to working than to walking.

This Hatteras Island use of *country* is the original use of the word, as meaning the land opposite. It occurs in this sense today nowhere else, so far as my observation goes. *Continent* is used for the mainland on some of the islands farther north, as on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts. The lady who used *country* in this way had been but recently married, and the bridegroom had furnished the trousseau, an ancient custom that prevails today nowhere else in North America, and one that is falling into disuse here.

I have always taken a kodak with me when visiting the island, and the chief pleasure derived from its use has been the taking of pictures of my friends there. On one of my early visits to Hatteras a young man asked:

"Wont you make a picture of my may and me?"

"I'll be delighted to," I replied; "but what does your ladylove look like?"

"You may not think her pretty, but she's a couthy girl, and canty too."

Here were words I had never heard before, but I soon came to understand their meaning, after I had met many of the island people who were "couthy women and trusty men." I have often met the word *may* in old English love songs, meaning a maid, a fair woman, a cousin, a sweetheart. It is used most often as meaning maid, of which it is really a contract form, and dates back to the middle of the fourteenth century or beyond that time.

Couthy, besides meaning tender, sympathetic, motherly, as applied to these good women, or affable, pleasant, agreeable, like a familiar friend, has another meaning which is well illustrated by the statement, "Will Watkins looked so kind and couthy-like to Lucy Lowe."

Canty means merry, brisk, lively, as in the old couplet

A cozy house and a canty wife
Keeps aye a body cheerly.

Cant was the first form of this adjective, and *trusty*, of course, means trustworthy. This is a use familiar to us.

I promised to meet the young people at nine o'clock the following morning to make the picture. At nine the young fellow came alone. When I asked why he had not brought the lady, he said: "She scooped me," meaning that she had got the better of him, run away from him, scampered off at the last moment. "And," he added, "she could fleech you, young man." Fleech is from the French, *flechir*; it passed into Middle English as *to bend*, then *to flatter*. Here again were words that I had never heard before; but I found that he meant she could flatter me into loving her, and then run away from me. Nothing so remarkable about that girl after all!

Another time the young man described her to me as smicker. I took it to mean that she was neat in her person and elegant in her manners, as he did mean, and rightly; but his friend told me that it really meant that 'she was soft on him.' What a strange mixture of mediaeval English and modern slang! I inadvertently mentioned the young man's name to the lady's mother, who said, "Oh, he scunners me," meaning "He digusts me," which would seem to be a causative use of what meant "to loathe."

Here a kelpie is a water-sprite, an animal of the sea, a water-dog of some kind. "A kelpie is a sly devil; but you might possibly catch one, for he always roars before a storm at sea." A Hatteras man looking on a seal in a Norfolk park told me that he had never seen a kelpie, but he imagined that a seal looked very much like one; and all along this coast Kelpie is a common given-name for a dog, especially for a water spaniel. In the Scotch he appears to be more like a horse, and foretells drowning.

All of the words mentioned so far are found in old English or Scottish ballads, and several of them occur in one of the three Mermaid songs heard occasionally along The Banks. These songs are now rarely heard except from the older women, and they seem ashamed to be caught singing

them. It has been with the greatest difficulty that I have ever persuaded them to repeat the words of an old song for me while I took it down from their dictation.

I have constantly met with other words in the speech of these good people, which I was inclined to regard as careless or slovenly pronunciations, believing that "Indolence doth much corrupt our language." In this class I place the pronunciation of words with the omission of certain letters; as, daugher (daughter), waer (water), buer (butter), ieer, (letter), and a host of others; faute (fault), fause (false), wanut (walnut), plead (pleased); others of unusual pronunciation, as trod (trot), throoked (thronged), leuch (laugh), birk (birch, sixteenth century form), egal (equal, like the French), thoct (thought, Scotch spelling, O. E.), sweet (sweetheart), fant (infant), wonders (wondrous), wharrel (quarrel, in Middle English, but French in origin), know (knoll), fole (fool); and others whose origin is not so evident, as throddy (plump), sleek, in good condition, as applied to a steer or to a mullet; cracker (boaster, cf. Burns and our "cracking jokes"), in which case Mr. Roosevelt's "crackerjack" would not be a "bully chap," but a boasting clown.

There are other words in which there seems to be the insertion of a letter; as bloast or bloust for brag; and still others with which we are familiar, but used here in an unfamiliar sense, as blabber, "a great blabber" meaning simply a great chatterer (goes back to fourteenth century and miracle plays); bloater, a chubby child; cant, gossip; cap, surpass, in "I can cap you at that," or "I can cap your story," like our "cap the climax," or the game of "capping verses"; accord, agree, in "Let's accord before we eat."

Abash means bring discredit on, and was used by a student from the coast in a speech made in a literary society at the University of North Carolina, in the sentence; "Shall we abash our national honor?"

Abrade may mean to sicken or nauseate, as "Cornbread and fish abrade his stomach," said by my hostess when I was really sick from too much tramping over dunes in an August sun.

Many of the words in my list are used with meanings other than those we now associate with them. *Fause* means a tidal creek or a ditch, as well as false. *Wanut*, used in warnit-know and warlock-knot, means a knot in timber or a particular knot in a rope, a very tight knot, and it is also used as a verb meaning to tighten, as the rope in rigging. *Birk* also means a smart young fellow, one who needs the birch, no doubt; and an interdune area, wet and grown up with aspen or cottonwood switches, was described to me as *birky*. Birkie in old Scotch has this meaning, and the verb *birk* in Scotland means to answer sharply. In the broadest part of the island near Buxton there are *knows* of sand covered with tall pines.

These words may be mere slovenly pronunciations, but if they are due to mere indolence, it is an indolence that affected our ancestors when they were laying the foundations of the English language, as many of them date back to the age of Chaucer; and they show as diverse origins and as fine a blending of different characters as the Englishman himself. Some of these pronunciations are natural musical variations.

In a Methodist church at Kinuakeet, on Hatteras Island to the north of the Cape, a young mother nursing two children sung to them a mermaid's song,

Follow, follow through the sea,
To the mermaid's melody,

* * *

the tune harmonizing very well with that of the hymn,

Come Thou fount of every blessing,

which the congregation was singing. This was in 1895, and yet the tune was essentially the same as that of Ariel's song in *The Tempest*,

Full fathom five thy father lies,
Of his bones are coral made,

* * *

sung in the days of Queen Elizabeth, and the music written out in the middle of the seventeenth century by John Banister. I have also heard Rosalind's Madrigal (1590) sung

from the rigging of a ship, the sloop *Loreda*,
 Love in my bosom like a bee,
 Doth suck his sweet;
 Now with his wings he plays with me,
 Now with his feet.

* * *

In the third line the singer said "he tickles me" instead of "he plays with me."

But the question naturally arises: How came this Elizabethan and other English here? In any one of several ways, or in several different ways. There are strong reasons for believing that the lost colony of Roanoke fled to the protection of its friends, the Hatteras Indians. This question was discussed by the writer many years ago. Then there are records of wrecks off Hatteras from 1558, when a ship was cast away near Secotan, manned by white people, and some of its crew preserved by the natives, and 1590, when Captain Spicer, Ralph Skinner, Hance, the surgeon, and others, eleven all told, were washed overboard from the ship of Raleigh's adventurers, to the present time, when many of the inhabitants of the island are there because their forefathers were wrecked there and preferred to remain on the island and make it their home. The language of the island, particularly the older forms of speech found there, is that of the better classes, or at least the middle classes in England in the days of Queen Elizabeth. The Raleigh voyagers having counted among their number gentlemen adventurers from all parts of the kingdom, it is not difficult to imagine that these forms were introduced by them.

The fact is interesting in itself, however we may account for it, and it will soon be a thing of the past, as the traveler and the tourist, the schoolmaster and the trader, are fast making even Hatteras like the rest of the world. The writer's acquaintance with the island began in his early childhood, and he has noted greater changes in the speech of the people since the coming of the daily mail in motor boats just ten years ago, than he had observed in the preceding thirty years, and the songs of the mothers and the grandmothers are well nigh forgotten by the daughters.



AUG 75



N. MANCHESTER,
INDIANA

